

OPENING STATEMENT
Nomination Hearing for Dawn O'Connell
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee
June 8, 2021

Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr, Members of the Committee – I am honored to appear before you today as you consider my nomination for the position of Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Chair Murray, thank you for the kind words of introduction.

I must also thank President Biden for nominating me to this important role and of course my family: my husband Ben and daughters Maddie and Frannie whose love, support and senses of humor sustain me through late nights and long hours of work.

I am honored to be on the same panel today with Dr. Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, the President's SAMHSA nominee.

I was called to public service early in life influenced by the example set by my parents: an educator and a social worker. This vocation was further strengthened as a young staffer on the Hill witnessing the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

On that day, I was evacuated from my office in the Longworth Building and stood with colleagues just a few blocks from the United States Capitol—watching in horror on a portable television as the Twin Towers fell. A few weeks later, our office was evacuated again—this time for several weeks—while it was secured following the deadly anthrax letters sent to Congress.

In 2005, my family with deep New Orleans roots, was impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Several of my aunts and cousins were forced to leave their homes—and a great aunt was among those evacuated from a nursing home unable to maintain power and safe conditions. It took our family several days to find her with fellow residents on a tarmac in Memphis—grateful to the responders that got her there unharmed.

These events ingrained in me the importance of a strong emergency response system. They also led to the formation of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR). The role for which I'm being considered today.

I took these lessons with me to HHS during the Obama Administration where I served as Deputy Chief of Staff to both Secretaries Sebelius and Burwell. In that role, I helped lead the responses to several public health emergencies—including the Ebola and Zika outbreaks—and honed the skills necessary to manage complex crises.

This experience coupled with nearly four years working for the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations—an international non-profit whose mission is to accelerate the

development of vaccines to prevent epidemics—uniquely qualified me to come back to HHS to serve as Secretary Becerra’s Senior Counselor for COVID-19.

As part of the Administration’s current COVID-19 response effort, I have seen how critically important the mission of ASPR is at this pivotal and unprecedented time. I have also witnessed the dedication and commitment of the ASPR team.

If confirmed for this role and entrusted to lead this team, my priorities would be threefold:

First, to deliver us quickly out of the current pandemic by continuing ASPR’s work of accelerating the development and distribution of vaccines and therapeutics and securing and distributing necessary personal protective equipment or PPE.

Second, to restore and maintain the public health emergency capacity that has been severely strained by the pandemic including replenishing the Strategic National Stockpile.

Third, to begin preparing for the next public health emergency whether natural or man-made by keeping vigilant watch of the horizon—scanning for what might come next.

If confirmed, I commit to working against each of these priorities in a transparent, accountable, and collaborative manner and to always let the science lead.

I also commit to working as a partner with this committee. Public health preparedness and response is neither a Republican issue nor a Democratic issue. It is an American issue. If confirmed, I will work with each of you to ensure that the communities you represent have the tools needed to prepare for the next public health emergency.

Finally, I pledge to do everything in my power to address the serious challenges ahead of us as we navigate threats that endanger Americans, our health and national security—both present and future.

I am prepared for the task ahead and honored to be nominated to serve as the ASPR. Thank you for considering my nomination. I look forward to answering your questions.